



Masculine Norm Failure in Indian men: A Qualitative Exploration of Shame, Anxiety and Aggression

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"Gender inequality is a problem in this country (India)."- Late Dr. Manmohan Singh, Former Prime Minister of India, NDTV, 28 December, 2012

ARTICLE INFO

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Dates:

Received: 11-06-2026

Accepted: 05-07-2026

Published: 06-07-2026

Keywords:

Masculine Norm Failure,
Gender Role Strain
Paradigm, Indian
Masculinity, Shame, Anxiety,
Aggression, Family Honour

How to cite:

Nim, A., Mittal, S. (2026)
Masculine Norm Failure in
Indian men: A Qualitative
Exploration of Shame,
Anxiety and Aggression
Mind and Society, 15(2):18-31
doi: 10.56011/mind-
mri-15220263

Abstract

Regardless of the growing literature body and theoretical interest in masculine norm failure and its psychological consequences, the lived experiences of Indian men remain significantly understudied. Along with this, the existing research depends on WEIRD populations and Western measurements tools which are not capable enough to capture India's cultural dimensions when it comes to masculinity. Grounded in Pleck's (1995) Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP), this qualitative study explored what Indian men experience psychologically when they perceive themselves failing to comply with the masculine norms, and how they make sense of those experiences. The data in the study as collected from 23 Indian men aged 18-35 through an open-ended qualitative survey via Google Forms (online). The data was further analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The dataset was able to produce three main themes and nine subthemes. The first theme, Psychological Experiences of Masculine Norm Failure, recorded shame, anxiety, aggression and emotional suppression as primary psychological responses by men to mask vulnerability instead of direct hostile behaviour. The second theme, Masculinity as an Internalised Identity, discovered that participants comprehended masculine norms as constitutive features of personal identity and self-worth. The participants rendered this norm-failure as threat to self-identity rather than situational inadequacy. The third main theme highlighted dimensions such as family honour (izzat), the provider role as a moral duty and intergenerational obligation, followed by relational suppression of personal struggle as culturally specific ones, which remains absent in the Western frameworks. The findings support and confirm the cross-sectional application of the GRSP while underscoring that Indian masculine norm failure upholds collective, familial and reputational stakes which the framework alone fails to theorise. This suggests how there is a need for tailored psychological assessments in India, as per the cultural population.

INTRODUCTION

Society frequently tells us what it means to be a man. Pleck (1995) defines how the masculine gender norms are shaped by the society by specifying how men ought to behave and feel. In the paper, titled, *"The gender role strain paradigm"* Pleck (1995) argues how these social norms function as evaluative standards against which men assess themselves and are judged by others, resulting in significant social and psychological consequences when unmet. Men are expected to adhere to the social norms such as emotional stoicism, physical toughness, competition and status, while barring vulnerability,

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relying on others, or opening up to others about their experiences of stress (Levant, 1996). The psychological cost for the individuals of conforming to a variety of gender role norms may include depression, anxiety, hostility, avoidance in seeking help, and overall depletion in subjective well-being (Mahalik et al., 2003; Vogel et al., 2011). Beyond these outcomes, research indicates when one fails to adhere to the masculine standards or norms, shame does not always necessarily result in internalized distress. Men are taught to suppress the vulnerability attained through emotions, and shame is often altered into aggression, which is a secondary defensive response; an overcompensation strategy used by men to mask certain emotions which are not socially accepted (Jakupcak et al., 2005; Krugman, 1995).

Pleck (1995) explains how men may be psychologically damaged through “masculinity norm failure”. He argues that the issue is not conformity itself, but the perceived gap between the gender rules which they have internalized and feel the pressure to perform. Despite the theoretical prominence of this idea, it's the lived experiences and personal narratives which remain underexplored (Addias & Cohane, 2005).

Masculinity as a social construct

The foundational work of Raewyn Connell contributes in a significant manner to the evolution of study of masculinity (Harianti, 2023). Connell (2005) showed that masculinity is not a fixed and rigid set of traits, instead it is a practice which is shaped by situations and relationships. Subsequent scholars in the mainstream of masculinity and gender studies agree that masculinity is a social construct (McDermott, Schwartz, & Rislin, 2016; Ross et al., 2020). Communities act a social guide for men, where they set expectations for men, tell them how they should think, perform and express emotions (Thompson & Pleck, 1995). Ross et al. (2020) demonstrate that these social constructs and norms influence behaviour by integrating boundaries of social acceptability within peer groups. The empirical research on the impact of social constructs of masculinity on psychological well-being is limited (Harianti, 2023). However, some studies do highlight the impact of masculinity on mental health including reduction in help-seeking behaviour (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Heath, 2019; Mahalik & Dagirmanjian, 2019; Seilder et al., 2016; Staiger et al., 2020; Wimer & Levant, 2011), depression (Lwamoto et al., 2018; Mahalik & Dagirmanjian, 2019; Oliffe & Phillips, 2008; Staiger et al., 2020), and problem with coping (Mincey et al., 2015; Agbayani et al., 2018; Spendelow, 2015). Additionally, numerous studies have documented that these impacts are far more

pronounced among men than women, showcasing how masculinity norms weigh severely on men's psychological well-being (Ross et al., 2020).

Dominance of Western masculinity research

Scholars have engaged in empirical studies to understand and measure masculinity. These include surveys and other quantitative tools. Many measurable tools have been created to enable systematic measurement of men's endorsement of masculine norms and their link with psychological well-being. These tools include Male Role Norms Inventory (Levant et al., 1992), the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (Mahalik et al., 2003), and the Male Role Norms Scale (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). Despite such scales and western studies exploring these concepts, lack of representation of subjective lived experiences of Indian men remains a significant gap.

Considering the geographical and cultural differences between the Western countries and India, perceptions of masculinity may also vary significantly. Therefore, Western studies may not fully capture the nuances and context-specific understanding of masculinity within the Indian socio-cultural framework. Henrich et al., (2010) showed that psychological studies disproportionately rely on WEIRD populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) and cautioned against generalizing these findings universally. Masculinity research is not exempted from this critique.

Masculinity in the Indian context

In India, masculinity literature has witnessed meaningful growth, but it has been scattered in multiple domains such as sociology, history and cultural studies rather than in core psychology. Nandy (1983) argues how the contemporary Indian masculinity is, a psychological outcome of colonial rule and the colonial gender hierarchy. He also mentions how the modern Indian masculinity is anxious, defensive and over-invested in toughness.

Theorizing Indian masculinity is complex and presents considerable challenges (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013). In everyday discussions, masculinity is often assumed as comprising of characteristics or qualities which are considered appropriate for men. Dasgupta & Gokulsing (2013) further state that Indian masculinity is largely framed through the lens of urban, middle-class biasness. Masculinity usually goes unnoticed because of its normative nature. However, it gets highlighted only in contrast to other identities. This “significant absence” (Barthes, 1967) points out its

silent power. Walby (1990) conceptualizes masculinity as a structure of social power and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Dasgupta and Gokulsing (2013) highlight how Indian patriarchy can take place in the form of private oppression of women within families, or in the form of public patriarchy where women maybe collectively subordinated by the whole society led by men.

In a qualitative study conducted by Pradhan & Ram (2010), multiple young males in India were asked a question, "What does it mean to be a real man?" The answers to this question included responses such as, *"being able to earn for a family and sustain it as well; to make the final decision making in the family; to physically satisfy spouse/partner, and to procreate while having strong physique."* Pradhan & Ram (2010) further mentioned how these answers revealed the distress Indian men face in adapting to the evolving culture of the country, with aggressiveness and sexual domination being considered as pointers of masculinity.

Theoretical Framework: Pleck's Gender Role Strain Paradigm

The present study is grounded within Pleck's Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) which was introduced in his book *The Myth of Masculinity* (Pleck, 1981). The Gender Role Strain Paradigm aligns closely with social constructionist theories of masculinities (e.g., Gerson & Peiss, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1991) which emphasize that the significant fact of men's lives is not their biological sex, but involves the whole process through which they become men (Kimmel & Messner, 1989, p.10). The theory itself is built on social learning theory which explains how people learn and pick up behaviours through observation, rewards and punishments. Pleck (1981, 1995) argued that masculinity and gender roles are defined by stereotypes and social rules, which arise from the dominant gender ideologies in society. Adults and children are assumed to internalise prevailing gender roles through processes of observational learning, reinforcement and punishment in social interactions. From this theoretical foundation, Pleck suggested that modern gender roles are full of contradictions and inconsistency. As a result, most men violate masculine norms in some way and hence fall short of adhering to dominant definitions of manhood (Berke & Zeichner, 2016).

Masculine standards and gender roles as social constructs that are externally imposed. The theory also posits that men experience psychological strain when

they fail to meet internalized masculine norms. Pleck (1995) implied that shame and anxiety are two main emotional outcomes of this psychological strain. Pleck (1995) argues that the paradigm of strain has three forms to it: Discrepancy strain (when men encounter gap between their actual self and idealized masculine roles norms, they result in experiencing shame anxiety and other negative emotions), dysfunction strain (when men adhere to the rigid masculine norms, but that results in negative consequences) and trauma strain (harm caused by the social process itself). The study keeps all these psychological strains in the center of the whole research process.

Within the framework of this theory, the question this research attempts to answer, is whether these predictions are also applicable to Indian men and how culturally specific factors influence and shape their experiences of masculinity.

Masculine norm failure: Shame, Aggression and Self-identity

In patriarchal societies, the masculine norms are rigid and severely enforced (Reigeluth & Addis, 2015), and nonconformity can result in a range of negative consequences such as name-calling & exclusion to homophobic threats and other methods of gender-based harassment and violence (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Pauletti et al., 2014). Scholars argue that masculine norms function as restrictive "straightjackets," that can suppress men's emotional expression and independence, and adversely affect their psychological well-being, physical health, interpersonal relationships, and even their academic performances (Pleck, 1981; Leaper et al., 2019). When men fail to meet the masculine standards, the resulting emotion of shame does not always remain internalised. Several empirical research have consistently shown how shame is often converted into aggression as a defensive regulation strategy. Jakupcap et al., (2005) found that masculine socialisation conditions men from childhood to expect negative consequences for emotional expression. Consequently, men perceive emotional expression and vulnerability as a threat to masculinity (Jakupcap et al., 2005). Under threat, men often react with fight or flight responses, avoiding shame or masking it through aggression, instead of acknowledging it (Krugman, 1995). In this way, the shame-to-aggression sequence reflects men's overcompensation. Thus, acting as a defence mechanism.

Aim and research questions

The present study addresses the documented gap in psychologically grounded qualitative research on experiences of masculine norm failure among Indian men. Using an online qualitative survey, the study employs Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework of Reflexive Thematic Analysis to examine qualitative responses. The research focuses on Indian men aged 18–35 who have encountered personal and social challenges related to masculine gender norms. The inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

Question 1: How do Indian men psychologically experience situations in which they perceive themselves as not adhering to masculine gender norms?

Question 2: How do Indian men make sense of and interpret these experiences of not conforming to masculine gender norms?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale for the qualitative approach

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore men's subjective lived experiences, personal interpretations, and emotional navigation in relation to masculinity within the context of contemporary India. The primary focus is on Indian men's experiences and interpretations of situations where they perceive themselves as not meeting socially constructed masculine expectations, and how they make sense of the emotions arising from such experiences. The questions comprised demographic questions and open-ended questions pertaining to masculine norms failure.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through an open-ended online survey, which was administered with the help of Google Forms. Online survey format instead of face-to-face interviews was deliberately chosen. Firstly, because masculine norms failure is a sensitive topic and carries significant stigma around it (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Second, online data collection enables the research to reach individuals from diverse backgrounds (Metropolitan cities, Tier 2 & Tier 3 cities) within India.

However, we must acknowledge the limitations of this data collection format. Online data surveys do not provide much scope for follow-up questions, and the length of responses may vary from short answers to more elaborate answers. Despite these limitations, Braun and Clarke (2013) recognize online qualitative

data as a legitimate kind of qualitative evidence in their book- *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. However, shallow responses may limit deeper insights.

Participants and Sampling

23 participants were recruited using criterion-based purposive sampling and snowballing. The inclusion criteria comprised individuals who self-identified as men, were also assigned male at birth, held Indian nationality, and were between 18 and 35 years of age. This age range was purposefully selected to capture a developmental period during which masculine identity is actively explored, negotiated, and shaped through social and personal experiences. Sample size was selected with the purpose of informational sufficiency instead of statistical representativeness. Recruitment was conducted through researcher's institutional networks, social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit and WhatsApp.

Analytical Approach

Narratives were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) that positions reflexivity as an essential aspect of research process. It acknowledges that the researcher's theoretical assumptions, background, positionality, and interpretive perspective are not "biases" to be eliminated. Instead, they are integral to meaning making. A theoretically informed lens drawing on Pleck's (1995) conceptualization of stress, anxiety, and shame within GRSP was used as a sensitizing framework to guide interpretation without predetermining findings.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the data collection. The online survey description clearly mentioned the aim and purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw from the study at any point of time without any consequences or penalty. No personal identifying information was collected apart from the email address which is also kept confidential. All the data was stored securely with the researcher.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the qualitative dataset produced three main themes and nine sub-themes, as summarized in Table 1. These themes addressed the two main questions of the research: the psychological experiences of Indian men when they feel that they

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have failed to adhere to masculine norms and standards. The extracted theme 1 captures the spectrum of psychological and emotional consequences, which includes numerous emotions like shame, anxiety, aggression, and emotional suppression. Theme 2 of the study examines identity-level experiences associated with masculine norm failure. This theme highlights how masculine standards may be internalized as personal truths by individuals instead of perceiving them as external pressures. The third theme, underscores the cultural context, emphasizing relational aspect of masculinity which is particularly salient in the Indian cultural context. These are expressed through notions of family honour, the providers' role, paternal influence, and the silencing of personal struggles. Altogether, these themes contribute to support the idea of Pleck's (1995).

Table 1: Major Themes and Sub-Themes Emerging from the Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Indian Men's Experiences of Masculine Norm Failure.

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Brief Description
Theme 1: Psychological Experiences of Masculine Norm Failure	Shame as Self-Evaluation	Participants experienced shame when failing to meet masculine expectations, often perceiving themselves as inadequate or "less of a man." Shame was directed toward the self and identity rather than specific behaviour.
	Anxiety and Fear of Social Judgement	Men described anxiety regarding how family, peers, and society would perceive them after masculine norm failure. Fear of ridicule, disappointment, or loss of respect emerged strongly.
	Aggression as Emotional Regulation	Aggression emerged as a defensive response to conceal vulnerability and restore control when masculinity was threatened. Anger

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Brief Description
		often followed shame and anxiety.
	Emotional Suppression and Avoidance	Participants frequently avoided revisiting painful incidents, suppressing emotions, or refraining from discussing distress due to masculine expectations of emotional restraint.
Theme 2: Masculinity as an Internalised Identity	Masculine Norms as Personal Truths	Participants viewed masculine expectations not as external societal rules, but as natural and unquestioned truths of manhood embedded in identity.
	Masculinity and Self-Worth	Failure to conform was often interpreted as a moral or personal inadequacy, leading participants to question their worth as men.
Theme 3: Family, Honour, and Masculinity in the Indian Context	Family Honour and Family Socialisation	Masculine norm failure was connected to concerns about family reputation and community judgement. Fathers, grandfathers, and elder male relatives played a central role in shaping masculine ideals through modelling, instruction, and emotional responses.
	Provider Role and Responsibility	Masculinity was strongly tied to economic provision, maturity, and fulfilling familial obligations, particularly as eldest sons or husbands.
	Silencing	Participants reported

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Major Theme	Sub-theme	Brief Description
	Personal Struggles	reluctance to express vulnerability or seek support due to fears of burdening others or appearing weak.

Theme 1: Psychological Experiences of Masculine Norm Failure

This theme captures the immediate psychological responses of Indian men to perceived failure in adhering to masculine norms. Four vital sub-themes emerged including shame as self-evaluation, anxiety and fear of social judgement, aggression as emotional regulation, and emotional suppression and avoidance. According to Tangney & Dearing (2002), shame is all about judging oneself as a whole, and guilt is about judging specific behaviour. Drawing on the distinction proposed by Tangney and Dearing (2002), participants' accounts reflected experiences of shame rather than guilt. Their perceived inability to conform to socially prescribed masculine norms was associated with fears of negative evaluation, suggesting that men internalized these perceived shortcomings as reflections of their overall self-worth rather than as isolated behavioural failures.

One of the participants shared that he was struggling to find a job after the COVID-19 lockdown. The participant tried to share this concern with his family, but his father got quite upset and angry with him. The participant shared that this whole incident raised a lot of questions in his mind about what it means to be a man. This uncomfortable interaction between the two parties, reflects the discrepancy strain resulting in shame, which eventually led him to question his male gender and its roles.

Another participant shared that he had been experiencing immense work-related stress. He shared with his father that he wanted to take a break from his corporate job to restore his psychological well-being through a short break. However, the father straightway scolded the participant and called the idea baseless. The father further recounted how, during his working years, attending work every day was seen as an obligation, regardless of the circumstances. The father also emphasized that man is supposed to be the provider and not the woman in the family. After this interaction the participant reported experiencing shame as the father did not approve of his decision.

Participants also reported experiencing anxiety when they failed to adhere to the masculine norms.

Participants expressed a sense of worry, about how others would react to their failure as man, especially family and friends. This highlights the performative nature of masculinity. Vandello et al., (2008) argue that men must publicly prove their masculinity.

One of participants mentioned how failing college semester exams brought a flood of emotions to his mind. The participant highlighted shame and anxiety as the most common emotions in this context. The participants further explain how he broke down in front of his friends. However, none of friends were able to understand the situation, as nobody came to console him. This incident made the participant think about the aftereffects of him crying while no one else was and quickly wiped the eyes. Participant further mentioned how he became anxious thinking rest of his people around him would make fun of him, later. This example explains Vandello et al., (2008) idea of masculinity as a precarious public appearance, which also points out the fear of judgement amongst men. This also highlights the pressure of masculine performativity.

Yet another participant shared, *"When I could not fix the car, my father's shook his shoulders in disappointment. It activated a panic mode in my brain. The whole idea of him thinking of me as a useless man, made me feel so much of anxiety and shame. I quickly closed the hood and snapped at him, yelled at him to get into the car, with my fists clenched, while I called a mechanic in silence."* This sequence of shame, anxiety and then aggression, into one incident aligns with the work of Jakupcak et al., (2005), which highlight the role of masculine socialization in shaping men's emotional regulation and expression. From the early childhood men are taught and conditioned to anticipate consequences of the emotional expression, particularly emotions that are considered feminine. Consequently, a link between vulnerability and threats to masculine identity is created. However, anger is considered to be masculine by many. In this example, the shame arising from failing to do a mechanical task in front of the father triggered an angry emotional reaction. Krugman (1995) illustrated this as a fight response to vulnerable emotion like shame; men, instead of acknowledging the feeling, tend to mask it through aggression to regain control. The clenching of fists and yelling at father, was not necessarily anger towards the father. Instead, they represent behavioural signs of shame, which he struggled to express.

Another participant shared, *"After my marriage I started using sunscreen and in fact I started carrying it*

with me all the time. I remember, how some of my colleagues acted surprised and disappointed when they saw me applying sunscreen in the office. I quickly kept the sunscreen away as I tried to avoid eye contact at that time. However, later, when I found one of those people who were giving me the look, I asked if he found it funny, with my hands clenched, he refused straightaway and mentioned how he was discussing a different topic altogether." This narrative reflects the pattern identified by Jakupcak et al. (2005) as men's fear of emotions, wherein perceived threats to masculine identity evoke emotional discomfort, anxiety, and defensive responses. This narrative may be interpreted in two ways. First, the participant's reaction suggests an anticipation of negative evaluation, wherein the surprised expressions of his colleagues were perceived as disapproval of a behaviour considered inconsistent with traditional masculine norms. From this perspective, the fear of being judged may have heightened his self-consciousness, leading him to conceal the sunscreen and subsequently confront a colleague. Such an interpretation aligns with Jakupcak et al.'s (2005) notion that threats to masculine identity can evoke anxiety and defensive responses.

At the same time, it is also possible that the participant's colleagues were indeed reacting to his behaviour and that their subsequent denial reflected an unwillingness to openly acknowledge their judgment. In this interpretation, the participant's perception of scrutiny was not merely assumed but grounded in actual social cues that signalled disapproval. Regardless of whether the judgment was perceived or real, the incident highlights how everyday practices that deviate from conventional masculine expectations can become sites of emotional discomfort, vigilance, and defensive behaviour.

This narrative also aligns with Long's (1987) argument about men's employment of aggression for the purpose of managing vulnerable emotions, and restoring the sense of control, when masculinity is threatened.

Theme – 2 : Masculine as Internalized Identity

The second theme refers to how participants in the study made meaning of their experiences pertaining to masculine norm failure. Theme 1 covers the emotional phenomenology of masculine norm failure whereas Theme 2 captures the interpretive layer of those lived experiences. Theme 2 explains the subjective meaning of that failure for the participants.

Men internalize masculine standards, rather than considering them externally imposed rules. Instead of describing these expectations as socially norms imposed by others, participants articulated them as truths about being a man. These findings are consistent with Pleck's (1995) Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP), which posits that societal expectations of masculinity become internalized through processes such as socialization, self-evaluation, and self-judgment. Participants in the present study appeared to perceive these

One of the participants reported, *"For me, not backing down in an argument is a true reflection of being a man in control, and it is something which I have seen in my family too, especially my father. However, when I froze during an argument over feminism with my friend the other day, it felt like I did not do good. It felt as if I betrayed my core family learning."* The phrasing used by one of the participants here "a true reflection of being a man in control" positions the masculine norms as an innate masculine identity. This finding supports Pleck's (1995) conceptualization of the internalization of masculine norms through processes of self-judgment and self-reflection. The participant's statement, *"betrayed my core,"* suggests that perceived failure to conform to masculine standards can evoke profound self-doubt and challenge one's sense of identity.

Another participant said that when he shared about feeling exhausted and taking a break from work, his father and grandfather responded with *"Crying is not for men it seems. Men should always provide for their family, and they should not sit home."* Crying in front of father and grandfather only invited more advice to be strong and stern. This account reflects Pleck's (1995) proposition that masculine norms are internalized through ongoing socialization and self-evaluative processes. The participant's father and grandfather reinforced the belief that emotional expression and vulnerability were incompatible with manhood. Such repeated familial messages appear to have shaped the participant's meaning-making, whereby masculine standards became central to defining what it means to be a man.

This theme also highlights the source from which men derive the idea of masculinity. These sources comprised family, particularly fathers and grandfathers or other male elders. Levant's (1996) also claims that boys learn about masculinity through observation within family relationships and structures. In India, the

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family-based origins of masculine standards are stronger because family honour is attached to it.

One of the participants quoted his grandfather, *"I raised 7 family members under a single roof". He also told how he managed his debts and protected the family single-handedly during all the tough times. The participant shared that this incident was a response another incident where he had been unable to take a stand for my sister against her in-laws's taunts and comments. The participant shared that this interaction with the grandfather somehow "crushed me because deep down I knew that I had failed myself as an elder brother."*

Another participant shared, *"After my mother passed away, it was Dad who held everything together in the family without even saying a single word to anyone. This gave me huge strength and hope of dealing with every possible problem. However, experiencing an emotional breakdown after losing my job felt something more than weakness as if I failed the moral code of the family. Something which I have lived with, throughout my life."*

This lived experience reflects Levant's (1996) idea of relational learning. A house where elder male figures set life examples and expectations for the son. *"Without complaining about it"* explains how men are supposed to absorb everything without even talking about it. This example also aligns with the idea of Connell (2005), on how masculinity is not innate but learned and grasped from the environment.

Theme 3: Family Honour, and Masculinity in the Indian Context

This theme specifically highlights the Indian aspects of masculine norms. This theme demonstrates how these expectations are primarily conveyed and reinforced within the family, particularly fathers, grandfathers and other elder male relatives who played the role of the primary models. The provider responsibilities and the family honour created the core content of the definition of a man. These figures not only modelled expected behaviours but also actively corrected unconventionalities through instruction, disapproval, or even storytelling. Additionally, the concept of *'izzat'* emerged repeatedly.

One of the participants recounted, *"My grandfather used to tell us stories every evening, specifically the ones where he explained how he was the only bread earner in the whole family of 8 people." He also explained how he had the responsibility of getting 5 sisters married with his own money, because his father was practically a drunkard, who quit his job,*

and his mother used to be busy managing the house. He would constantly say "A real man does all the hard work by himself and does not seek help from family members who are already expecting from you." The participant also shared, *"When I was struggling with my business and the loan which I had to repay for the shop, he looked at me and just shook his head in disappointment. That silence hurt me more than any scolding ever could. I felt like I had betrayed my family, and I could not live up to the legacy built by my grandfather."* Such narratives provide insight into Levant's (1996) proposition that boys learn and internalize masculine norms through relational observation, whereby they observe and emulate the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses of significant male figures when confronted with life's challenges.

Provider responsibility emerged as a vital pillar of the masculine identity explored in this study, especially for the eldest sons. Breakdown and failure in this domain were experienced as a direct threat to the status and honour of the family. For participants in this research, the ability to earn and provide for the family was not just an economic aspect, rather it was an elementary metric on which their adequacy as men was evaluated. This finding directly aligns with the published work of Pradhan & Ram (2010) which stated that Indian men across different age groups identified earning for a family and sustaining one, as crucial to being "a real man".

One of the participants further shared an experience to confirm it: *"My marriage was only 3 years old, and I was struggling to cope with the toxic culture of my workplace and eventually thought of quitting the job and take a short break and later search a new opportunity. However, when I discussed this very idea with my wife and my parents, I was taken aback by their reaction. They asked me all types of questions which made me uncomfortable. This thing was not just about finances but instead it questioned everything I uphold as a man. The question was about who is responsible to keep the family name intact in the community. I was told by my parents that this situation will not be taken positively by the relatives or even the neighbours. And that it will bring shame to the family."* This narrative serves as a prime example of how the provider's role in the Indian context carries implications and consequences that goes well beyond the economic function. This is consistent with the notion of precarious manhood, which argues that

masculine status must be continually proved in public and private sphere (Vandello et al., 2008).

The third subtheme also highlighted what the participants did not do: they did not speak. Several participants confessed to suppressing their vulnerability and avoiding of seeking help. One of the participants mentioned, *"I live in a joint family, and whenever in a family gathering I bring up the topic of being overwhelmed with family responsibilities, my uncle would immediately jump in the conversation and say, 'These problems are very small, in front of the problems which your father and I have faced in our past, and we made sure we never troubled anyone with it.' Overtime, I learned to keep thoughts to myself, and eventually stopped talking about it within the family. This did make me uncomfortable, but it was still better than listening to stories which made no sense as of today."* This narrative captures two mechanisms here. First one, the dismissal of expressed vulnerability by an elder male figure. The second mechanism is anticipatory: the participant now chooses to suppress his struggles. This is not just a response to direct dismissal but an anticipation of how disclosure would be received by the parents and other family members.

DISCUSSION

What the findings confirm: GRSP in the Indian context

The results of this study adhere to the central claim of Pleck's (1995) Gender Role Strain Paradigm, that internalized masculine norms function as standards of self-evaluation against which men evaluate their masculinity. The findings also state that when men fail to adhere to masculine norms, it produces shame, anxiety and aggression. A particularly salient finding emerging from the dataset was the role of aggression as a response to perceived failures in meeting masculine expectations. Participants' accounts closely reflected Pleck's (1995) concept of discrepancy strain, wherein men experience distress when they perceive a gap between internalized masculine norms and their ability to conform to them. This discrepancy often gave rise to self-directed emotions, such as shame and self-doubt, which targeted the individual's sense of self rather than specific behaviours. In several narratives, aggression appeared to emerge as a response to, or expression of, this underlying emotional distress.

This matters for three key reasons: First, it demonstrates that Pleck's Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) framework is applicable in India, and

is not just limited to the Western context, (O'Neil, 2008). Second, the qualitative data generated in the Indian context extends this framework by highlighting aggression as a significant emotional response alongside shame and anxiety. Third, the qualitative nature of the present study provides an in-depth understanding of how discrepancy strain is subjectively experienced by men. By capturing the lived experiences of the participants, the findings highlight the emotional and psychological realities underlying perceived failures to meet masculine norms. Furthermore, the study contributes culturally grounded evidence from the Indian context. Thus, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature, which has largely been dominated by Western perspectives on masculinity and gender role strain.

Addis and Cohane (2005) criticized masculinity research for focusing mainly on outcomes such as depression, anxiety, shame etc., without adequately exploring how men actually experience these processes internally. The present study addresses this gap because it does not merely identify that men experience shame, anxiety, or aggression when they fail to meet masculine standards. Through the qualitative narratives the present study reveals how men interpret these experiences, how they make sense of their perceived failures, how they manage and regulate their emotions, and how shame transforms into anxiety or aggression.

Internalization is the critical mechanism

A key finding of the study is that men internalized masculine norms and experienced shame, guilt and anxiety when they failed to meet these internalized standards. The first subtheme, *Masculine Norms as Personal Truths*, captures the whole idea with specific clarity. The participants who described *'freezing during the argument'* and also experiencing *'betrayed my core'* illustrates such internalization (Pleck, 1995). For the participants, masculine norms were not just ideas that could be accepted or rejected after careful thought. These norms had become such a fundamental part of how they understood themselves. In other words, changing these beliefs did not feel like simply revising an opinion; it felt like losing a part of who they were. This reflects Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus*, where social expectations become so deeply embedded through everyday experiences that they are experienced as natural, normal, and inseparable from the self.

The sub-theme *'Masculinity and Self-Worth'* demonstrates how deeply internalized masculine

norms affect men's understanding and sense of self. When these masculine standards are experienced as personal truths, failing them is not perceived as situational inadequacy instead as global insufficiency. When the participants failed to meet the internalized standards and norms, they restricted themselves from describing it as mistakes or obstacles. Instead, they reported feeling inadequate as a man.

The Indian Data: What Western frameworks miss

Theme 3 identifies a set of cultural dimensions within the country, that the GRSP and Western masculinity struggle to anticipate and capture fully.

These dimensions include the role of family honour, and the role of cultural idiom such as 'izzat', in molding the stakes of masculine norm failure. When it comes to Western literature, masculine norm failure is considered to be a threat to individual's identity and social standing amongst the peer groups. However, in the Indian context masculine norm failure is considered to be a greater threat as it pertains not only to the individual but also to the collective honour and family reputation. This collective ownership of masculine norm failure deepens the psychological strain which Pleck (1995) identified in a way which the GRSP could not theorize.

Secondly, in Western literature, the role of the provider is usually conceptualized as one of the multiple masculine characteristics, that operates beside emotional stoicism, physical toughness, and heterosexual success. Whereas in the Indian context, the failure to provide functions as a foundational threat to their masculine identity and family honour. Srivastava (2007) and Nandy (1983) have demonstrated that Indian masculinity is built around the aspects of economic, familial and moral obligations, that are different from Western frameworks.

Lastly, the third dimension involves silencing of personal struggle, not only to guard their own pride, but also to protect their families. As per the Western literature, the individuals there avoid help-seeking because it conflicts with whole idea of independence and toughness (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Vogel et al., 2011). However, in the Indian context men prefer to stay quiet in order to protect themselves and also to avoid burdening their parents, hurting family honour, or making elders feel that they had failed. These culturally specific dimensions bear methodological implications as standardized Western instruments like Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (Mahalik et al., 2003)

and the Male Role Norms Inventory (Levant et al., 1992) do not fully capture these cultural differences.

Shame, anxiety and aggression as psychological outcomes

Tangney et al. (1992) suggest that shame and anxiety often occur together because both emotions stem from a fear of being negatively judged by others. When individuals perceive that they have failed to meet important social expectations, they may feel ashamed of themselves while also becoming anxious about how others might view or evaluate them. Gilligan, (2003) demonstrated that there is a particular sequence of emotions which underlies all the destructive aggression: the first emotion which is evoked is shame, which goes on and leads to rage and then eventually violence. Malti & Krettenauer (2013) underlined shame in aggression etiology, a trait which Eisenberg (2000) argues to be socially learned through observation, modelling, and verbal transmission. However, it is crucial to note that in this study, none of the participants reported getting violent. Though some reported getting angry and frustrated.

The participants lie somewhat in the middle part of the equation provided by Gilligan (2003)- where individuals are using defensive aggression to control emotions rather than lashing out violently. In the examples showcased in this research, the aggression was relational and very specific i.e., snapping at his father, clenching fists, confronting a colleague. Such psychological strain may easily be overlooked by both the individuals themselves and the mental health practitioners. From a clinical perspective, recognizing these underlying dynamics is crucial, as interventions that focus solely on surface-level symptoms may fail to address the deeper shame, anxiety, and identity-related struggles driving the individual's distress. Greater awareness of the role of masculine norms can help clinicians develop more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches to assessment and treatment.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are few limitations of this study that must be acknowledged. First, the online survey format was chosen specifically, for reasons of anonymity and geographic reach. However, the dataset may be constrained by the depth and richness of data collection. Unlike semi-structure interviews, the follow up and probe questions could not be asked which resulted in shorter and less developed responses. The findings of this study must be considered as an initial

exploration, rather than a full phenomenological account.

Also, while the study focuses on the Indian men between the age bracket of 18-35, it does not consider all social contexts of India such as caste, religion and class. Since masculinity in India may vary across these factors (Srivastava, 2007) future research should include a more diverse sample and interview schedule that can address these additional social contexts. Moreover, the study relies on self-reports, which may have limited the depth and scope of the information obtained. Participants may have selectively disclosed experiences.

Finally, while Pleck's (1995) Gender Role Strain Paradigm provided a useful framework for understanding the strain associated with masculine norm failure, it did not fully capture the complexity and cultural nuances of Indian men's lived experiences. Future research could benefit from incorporating additional theoretical perspectives to broaden this understanding.

CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to the growing literature on masculinity by providing a qualitative account of how Indian men experience and make sense of masculine norm failure. The findings reveal that perceived failures to meet masculine expectations are associated with shame, anxiety, aggression, and emotional suppression, while also shaping men's sense of identity and self-worth. Although the findings broadly support Pleck's (1995) Gender Role Strain Paradigm, they further demonstrate that masculine norm failure in the Indian context is deeply embedded within concerns of family honour, provider responsibilities, and intergenerational socialization. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Indian men, the study highlights the need for culturally sensitive frameworks and psychological interventions that acknowledge the unique social and familial dimensions of masculinity in India.

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